

# Phenomenology Theories and Painted Objects From Vincent Van Gogh, Gani Odutokun and Irokanulo Emmanuel: A Critical Assessment in Modernistic Philosophy of Image and Text

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## Abstract

This study sets out to demonstrate with relevant images and literature how the relevant streams phenomenology, philosophy and painted objects are viewed as one indivisible aesthetic element. These elements operate a closure in basic terms in making meaning out of daily life fundamental principles: one using the word for coherence and consistency while the other employs space, line and colours to infer meaning. The practice of phenomenological theories and the practice of painting seem to have one soul and one purpose in which elements are explored with individual understanding, and, that is; it is an experiential knowing that the artist or author tries most times without much success to relate to their audience, their lived experience for discussion, because of its complex text or meaning of images found either in painting or philosophical text these experiences could be difficult in a clear dialogue. Three distinctive examples are studies in terms of paintings and the philosophical theories of Heideggerian school examine to clearly exemplify these thoughts into contemporary dialogue of phenomenology to contextualise these difficulties within the body of phenomenological theories and painted objects as one source of creative force whether in text or image.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, process of painting, Modernism, modernity, Vincent Van Gogh, Gani Odutokun, Irokanulo, Emmanuel

**DOI:** 10.7176/ADS/77-05

**Publication date:** October 31<sup>st</sup> 2019

## 1 Introduction

The first man who began to speak, whoever he was, must have intended it. For surely it is the talking that has put “Art” into painting. Nothing is positive about art except it is a word. Right from there to here all art become literary. We are not yet living in a world where everything is self-evident. It is very interesting to notice that a lot of people who want to take the talking out of painting, for instance, do nothing else but talk about it. That is no contradiction; however, the art in it is forever mute part you can talk about forever. For me, only one point comes into my vision. This narrow, biased point gets very clear sometimes. I didn’t invent it. It was already here. Everything that passes me, I can see only a little off, I am always looking. And I see an awful lot, sometimes – Willem De Kooning 1904—1997. P 556 Peter Selz and Joshua, C. Taylor 1968

The above position of Willem De Kooning, gave rise to the authors thought as a model to re-examine and position their idea as a vital point in thinking through the relationship between image and text. Arising from this similar position, this study focuses on phenomenology theory versus painting practise to examine the point of convergence as one concept of different thought process. The present study establishes the relations between art (object) and text as a point of convergence between modern philosophy and theory; using phenomenological method of assessing the meaning of these objects of Art, especially “painting” in particular. This study relies strongly on the proposition of Max Van Miami, as a theoretical underpinning as he observes:

In some sense all phenomenology is oriented to practice—practice of living. But from the perspective of our pragmatic and ethical concerns we have a special interest in phenomenology. We are [questioning] how to act in everyday situations and relations. This pragmatic concern I will call ‘phenomenology of practice’ —(Max Van Miami 2007:13)

This study relies on the theory of phenomenology to draw artistic inferences by means of intellectual debate on the relationship between an object and the process of painting which gives rise to the painted object. This is due to the fact that text emerging from the painted objects, at the earliest times of Vincent Van Gogh, to the present writers, critically evaluating paintings as one of the objects of discussions; with the hope of clearly redefining our understanding of painted objects and text as one medium of a modern visual language. The scope of this study covers the era of Van Gogh’s artistic experience of the period of the present writer in 2019 using painted objects of these periods as forms of texts in the analysis. Signifying the art, especially “drawing and painting” have generated quite a lot of controversies; as the meaning and the processes used in arriving at it; or what informs the decision of the artist during creations of these objects. What is art and specifically “painting”?

According to Bernstein (2006:234), refers to “the aim of art is to embody personification, to a representation of the need for symbolic, irreducible material meaning, then art’s becoming spontaneous in relation to its medium, its constitutive impenetrability, is the institutional way in which we self consciously authorises that need and necessity.” Phenomenological philosophy according to Jonathan A. Smith et al (2009:11) is simply the theory of structures of experience in a personal viewpoint without rigid collective analysis of such an experience, but rather, a critical revelation, or the reconstruction and deconstruction of such experience within a personal understanding of it. How one understands these experiences and tries to reconstruct them in one’s view and makes sense out of them, is the beginning of the concept of phenomenology. Husserl insists that the idea of phenomenological philosophy is a discussed experience as they accord the person that experienced them, not as people assumed such experiences to be, it’s making an individual concept of the experience as the focal point of discussion either in writing or as painted object.

Philosophy, like arts tries to relate and conceptualise a definitive way of capturing meaning and truth by giving an account of how words can connect to pre-existing determinate things in the world of matter. Philosophy like any other subject, is fashioned within the device of language, while language is itself governed by history; as history changes language follows, ideas are changed with the flow of history, language and culture modified into a fresh outlook which embodies new culture and practice of art, therefore, the focus of philosophy returns our attention, to the concerns of the Kantian and post Kantian traditions, which concentrated on the role of thought and language as constitutive of what we take the truth about the world to be, rather than as simply mirroring the truth of what is already supposedly there in an intelligible form. It is exemplified in a book by George Smith 2018 titled *The Artist-Philosopher and The New Philosophy* where he argues that both the artist and the philosopher seem to be engaged in one central issue which is knowledge creation, whether it is through sophisticated philosophical text or using colours, lines, space and images in realising a thought in a discussion, whether verbally or non-visually, the process is still the same.

George Smith (2018) has developed a critical thought process of a metaphysical nature for which links artists with sophisticated theories culminating in a profound understanding of the art from decades to the present. He terms this process, the “artist—philosopher”, which seems, to be the future of modern philosophy. For George, the artist seems to have the ability to concretise the philosophical abstraction through their engagement with paint and visual objects as the possibilities of the new theories manifesting to the reality of our times.

## 2 Philosophical Concepts and Painted objects

Philosophical concept became the main idea of the early twentieth century philosophical dialogue, a process that got popularised by Edmund Husserl (1858—1938), Martin Heidegger (1889—1976) and Jean Paul Sartre (1904—1980). These prominent names of great scholars in this field of study are closely associated with the philosophical theory of “existentialism” that advocates knowing the individual rather than a sample multitude in the philosophical theory in the twentieth century. The theory and practice of phenomenological philosophy has always been a critical philosophical thought in the early and later twentieth century. This philosophical theory is explained as Holderlin explains in a letter to Hegel in (Bowie 1990: 82), his understanding of the theory of “I” the absolute. In simple terms he deconstructs this idea to be central to the universal realisation through the “I, theory” where he opines that all things are made meaningful because “I” concept has realised and understood them from the perspective of a being and within this context, it inspired the concept of the world, where all things exist within certainty order and understanding.

The context of the “being” becomes a better forum to understand the idea of phenomenology (Gregory Fried and Richard Polt 2001: 33—34). Phenomenology is a theory or thought about how we engage things in the material world and we understand the universe, it is within this theory that the concept of “being” is dominant. Phenomenology sometimes refers to the primordial experience that one gains within a perceptual context which means uninfluenced by other elements. Many authors have spoken of their phenomenological experience as pure and innocent as words cannot capture its level of sincerity to the subject matter of discussion. The position of Martin Heidegger has further cleared this phenomenon in some cases and contradicts this understanding of phenomenology in another viewpoint as a way of understanding the basic context of knowing and reacting to the being as it expands in the presence of consciousness. It is the reflective process without the pretentious act toward the intending object that changes not really the object in context. The practice of phenomenology is the hypothesis of the practice of painting or perhaps, the theories and mannerism of the word “painter” over their creative imagination on the surface of their picture plane.

The practice of painting, especially the contemporary practice seems to the authors to be the best way of explaining in concrete terms the word “phenomenology”. In many ways the practice of painting is also the practice of looking, thinking and identifying in space, lines and colours as some form of reasoning, and practicing speech in a chosen language. Let’s rethink the thought of Paul Klee in Colin Rhodes (1994:9):

If my works sometimes produce a primitive impression, this ‘primitiveness’ is explained by my discipline, which consists of reducing everything to a few steps. It is no more than economy; that is the

ultimate professional awareness, which is to say the opposite of real primitiveness

Here, we can see that Paul Klee, the artist is engaged with his primordial experience of the object of his practice which is “painting” and the internal experience he gains from the subject which is profound and beyond a clear explanation. This article indicates that the visual construction of painting appears to practically explain what phenomenological philosophy is, in a meaning making process.

The present study reviews the paintings of Vincent van Gogh (1853—1890), Gani Odutokun (1946—1995), and some of Irokanulo’s studies of the representational image in constant dialogue with contemporary philosophical issues. In studying these painted objects, aesthetic theories aided in examining the discussions of Heideggerian over what representations in painting invoke. This study also assesses these thoughts in discourse in visual arts particularly in painting. Representational image in a painting is critically examined, the meaning relations of artistic expression in relation to the society were considered and the need to generate a semiotic understanding of images the artist creates was also taken into cognizance. Experience has shown that painting goes beyond aesthetics, it has rather distanced itself from what Socrates or Plato called “illusion and deceit or perhaps technical productions of physical illusion as reality.” The painting of Vincent Van Gogh titled “*the farmer shoes*” is one example of the theory of representation and critical philosophical content when Martin Heidegger drew the painting critical dialectic dialogue which one of the major twentieth century philosopher Meyer Schapiro (1968) firmly disagreed with Heidegger on the account of the “farmer’s shoes” and draw a serious aesthetic dialogue in the recent times. Because for him (Schapiro), the discussion of the “farmer’s shoes” by Heideggerian philosophy seems to be a mixed up with the images represented on the canvas. These represented images are sometimes the symbolic thought of the artist in order to actualise their idea towards the subject matter, which the artistic expression seeks to fulfil not necessarily the actual image represented on the canvas.

This discussion continues to focus on the meaning or the intended meaning of the word “painting” and critically observes how this phenomenon tries to explain most time our social and psychological construction. The authors examines the work of Michel Foucault (1826—1984), on his critical evaluation of the painting and the position of authorship in contemporary literature. The work of Foucault in Robert Wicks (2001) exemplifies what painting intends to explain to the society in accordance with the reading of Foucault’s works. This dimension of thought forms the theoretical basis of the argument in the present study.

According to Foucault in Wicks (2001), Western thought in painting has two distinctive principles: words and images. These have usually been kept distinct by the various artists and when they present them the same time one seems to subordinate the other in artistic relevance. However, a painted image or object resembles an object in real life situation. More so, whenever a painted object resembles an object in the real world, it tends to evoke the presence of that object for critical thought. Yet in terms of phenomenology, it is only thought that leads to another thought which we are often addressed or manifest in the subject of the painted object.

In all ramifications, words and painted objects tend to share the same spirit such that sometimes the artist or author finds it difficult to explain to the audience, but present to them his vision as body of object to dialogue with. For example, Foucault argues that “Magritte’s painting” disrupts the traditional understanding of either text or image. The elusiveness of words and the object they intend to represent bears a strong influence in the phenomenological theories and the painting it intends to serve. The position of a phenomenologist is what these paintings strongly represent, and the signifier as the word and the signified as the pictures or the paintings shall be discussed in this context. Here, these artists that this article frames did not at any time like Rene Magritte (1898—1967), reject the word “the artist to a thinker” but in the very ways exemplify the philosophical concerns of Magritte’s idea of a thinker and his art. It is within this thinking that the present study reviews the paintings of Van Gogh, Odutokun and Irokanulo as models in articulating this argument and position.

### 3 The Argument: Paintings and body of philosophical theories

The pivotal point of this study is that the process of painting and the process of phenomenological text are the same processes of reacting to the structure of experience through paintings or text. What is clear, is that the result or object created within this context is the response in the interpretation of one’s structure of experience gained through the process of painting or philosophical text. The idea is to establish the fact that phenomenological text and painterly thought are similar in processes. Although it is difficult to thoroughly and truly analyse phenomenological text and difficult too, to subject the process of the painting to clarity. It is an undeniable fact that the similarities between phenomenological text and the practice of painting in the creative arts. According to Heidegger, it is essentially difficult to explain in detail the process of phenomenological philosophy or that of painting, this fact was also put forward by Rebacca Fortnum and Chris Smith (2007: 165) whose efforts were channelled towards conceptualising and mapping out processes of documenting the practice of the art. Through this process, they constantly met difficulty, yet the works remain unexplainable; but these two continue to have similar goals in reaching their audience. This fact, clearly suggests that the practice of painting and practice of phenomenology and existentialism seems to agree here, as the philosophical concept seeking that we look for



individualism within the multitude in the crowd, what one feels and thinks becomes more important if compared to the thinking of the multitude towards positivism. According to (Thomas, R. Flyer 2006: 4), “the existentialists can be viewed as reviving the personal notion of ‘truth’, a truth that is lived as distinct from and in opposition to more detached and scientific use of the term” In many ways the practice of drawing and painting become the same with the practice of thinking through the various elements in the society using the medium of colour to actualised thought processes and the same with philosophical context of phenomenology and existentialism.

#### 4 Vincent Van Gogh (1853—1890)

Emotion and the justification of individual realisation of “truth” is one of the features of Van Gogh’s paintings which the philosophical theories of the existentialism seem to accept as a basic element of truth; since it is focused on the individual realisation of the concept of the universe rather than a collective perspective. Nature has been a great issue with great thinkers of this world, such as the interpretation of nature and the concept of the “I” as the life giver of nature. This means that meaning without the interpretations of the “I” nature is just an inanimate object; it is the self- conscious or the self- determining “I” that brings it to human judgement as we have seen in Van Gogh’s interpretation of night (Schelling in Bowie 1990: 103), however, Van Gogh presents to us his understanding and interpretation of this unique “ nature”. Starry night becomes the window to examine Van Gogh’s phenomenological interpretation of nature, according to Bernstein (2006: 278) suggesting that “Van Gogh’s displaying of paint-on-canvas does not substitute painting for order in creation, it rather sets up an inner affinity between the arrangement of matter as the condition of representing and the material object represented in order that the worth or dignity or authenticity of each is revealed.” This shows clearly that Van Gogh’s ideas of representation is externally driven by the propelling emotional force within his being, this he struggled not to narrate to the audience, but confronts with this propelling power within him and allows us the (audience) to live these experiences too on the surface of his painting, his perception of these objects and nature around him might be a material of a proposal that structural perception or thought is the central to understanding phenomenology which in the author’s thinking is fundamental in the creation of the “word” Art, perhaps again in an attempt to understand Van Gogh. Just like what Husserl in Thomas, R Flynn (2007: 32), said “that the point of phenomenological method is not to explain (by finding causes) but to get us to see (by presenting the essence or intelligible contours)”.



Figure 1 artist Vincent Van Gogh

Title: Starry night, Medium: Oil on Canvas, year of production: 1889,

A critical review of his painting “ the starry night” suggest his struggle to present his world to us, to view and understand it, this emotion characterises Van Gogh’s painting as he believes one’s emotion and perception is greater than the perceived object. A careful study of the painting “the starry night “shows that the artist presents his vision of colourful night for our perception to judge, his thinking and understanding of aesthetic of the country side, not that he copies the elements of nature rather he subjects these elements to a critical scrutiny and interprets them as they occurs to his being and understanding. The paintings seem to suggest to us the structure of colours in the night as he professed it, we could see the dynamic strength of Van Gogh’s of colours in the

skies this act only could be seen by the artist and how these colours in his view are like energy in the sky.

His interpretations of the skies by Van Gogh show clearly that he was a phenomenologist of some sort. He seems to be telling us, that the world or the environment is filled with energy which the ordinary eyes cannot see he then tries to depict with his short strokes of colours representing the field of colour perception, just like the theory of the existentialist when he seems to find comfort in phenomenological expression. His artistic expression became the focal point of post impressionism. The contrast between the representation of paint on canvas and the real assumes that we are central to subjectivity in our perceptual ability and in our structure of language, discursive practice of communications, his (Van Gogh) representation is beyond the realm of language and what is established as formation of meaning and significance. Call this, what you like –we are the locus or origin or sufficient source of all meaning and sense in all that we engage upon. Van Gogh has demonstrated that art is indeed a branch of the new philosophy that most practitioners are yet to understand.

### 5 Gani Odutokun (1949—1994)

He was a foremost exponent of the Zaria Art School who propounded and expanded upon the “Accident and Design” principle in painting. He allowed his paintings to follow the dictates of accidental design before seeking the imagery within the colour flow. His art is characterised by broad brush-strokes, colourful composition and daunting imagery, most times quite aesthetically pleasing to the senses. Odutokun’s paintings engage the theories of Kant within the context of liquidise paintings. He brings to bear his thought process on the canvas and allows viewers to have a second thought of issues before them once again in a systematic process. It is essential to look at Gani through the eyes of (Wendell Allan Marinary 1994: 2), he insisted for Kantian theory “the human reason presupposes the two elements or intuitions and thoughts or concept for sensibility and understanding, respective.” He added that art or aesthetic understanding has to do with the quality of sensibility of the artist or the preceiver in question of a particularly object of aesthetic. His artistic philosophy is the theory of accident and design, accident brings to bear new context and purpose and yet create new knowing that cannot be predetermined by the initial circumstance.



Figure 2: Artist: Odutokun Untitled, medium: oil on canvas, year of production 1993  
 Source artist’s family collection, 2001

Gani Odutokun’s painting is a clear understanding of the philosophical assertion of “the thing in itself” very awkward in trying to choose words to explain this phenomena. His painting is based on the principle of the idea over medium. To have an understanding of the surface, the observer must first be a thinker to follow the artist's intentions flow. His art works provoke a lot of thought on the medium of art and the social constraints to keep society in a serious embryonic manner. The essential truth in odutokun’s painting is not actually on the images in the frame but what they stand for in concept and how they present or interpret real life situation, just like the thinking of Derrida in Bernstein in (1993: 168), “the truth in painting is the focus on the frame as a way of interrogating the idea that art has essence, an integrity, in the virtue of which it is art and nothing else.” While the representation of the painted object as fearful and threatening is a central feature in the drama that his painted surface focuses on interpreting the human concept by reducible objects as his colour field responds to the aesthetic value which his painting intends to carry as a message to the public. The public is perhaps invited by Odutokun to reason whether images or text are the reading of philosophical epistemically impossible. The painting can best focus on the submission of Derrida in Bernstein (1993: 159), “in Derrida artistic modernism becomes philosophical, and philosophy becomes modernist” this is clear in the paintings of Odutokun as he tries to capture the narrative of the ill of the society by his effective use of the reducible objects as a symbol of aesthetic representations of philosophical text. The artist is careful not to identify with any tangible object in his



painting as he seems to believe that we are ever evolving subject on the surface of the earth, poetically he seems to affirm the voice of Friedrich Holderlin (1770—1843), as he echoed in Bowie (1990: 84)

Holderlin's question how one, is to sustain oneself as oneself in the changes with which one is confronted in the world, an idea which he sees as central to poetic production. It should already be clear, this is a vital factor in the text, that Holderlin does not limit his exploration to the cognitive dimension of the self, but seeks to incorporate affective and other dimension of the self as well.

The painting of Odutokun continues to sustain this idea of losing and realising oneself within the concept of the ever evolving world, come to be confronted with new ideas from the old as his thinking propels and captures the restlessness of our generation. 'Odutokun seems to point to the fact that his painting has long demonstrated the coming of the artistic modernist that George Smith is acknowledged today as the new philosophical keys. In no small measure we can understand the artist modernity as we study and imagine his thoughts on the surfaces of the canvases.

## 6 Irokanulo Emmanuel

Irokanulo, Emmanuel is a product of the Zaria painting School and he has been a teacher of the subject for some time now at the Yaba College of Technology, yaba Lagos. Has chooses to employ and explore the material of philosophical text and the linguistics of painting as a process of constructing modernity. He brings to bear the economy of form as dictated by Paul Klee using the understanding of primitivism as a concept of modernity in the modernist approach to his painting.

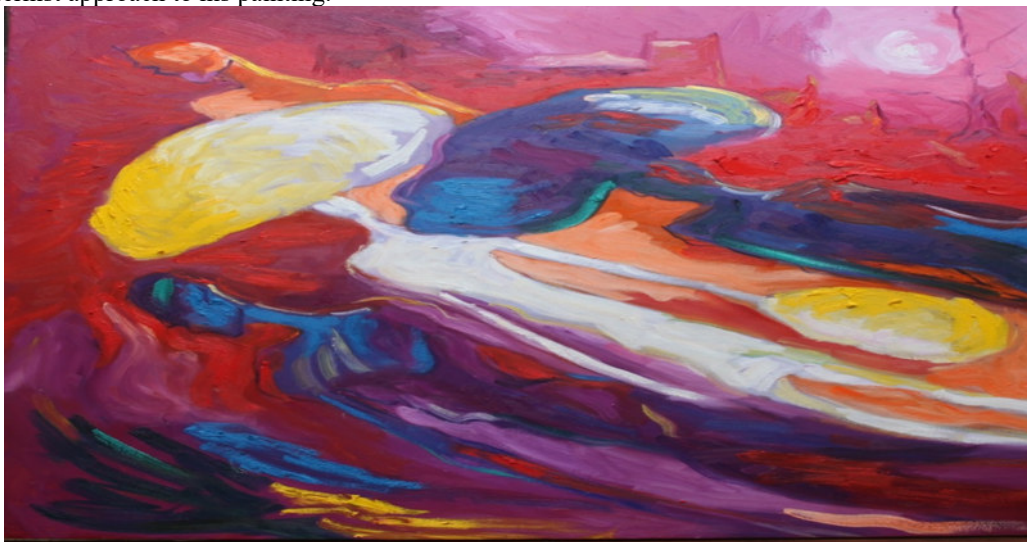


Figure 3 Artist: Irokanulo, Emmanuel Title: The lamentations of Zamafara, Medium Oil on Canvas Year 2019

Source one of the author's paintings

Here, the artist—writer merges his engagement with shadow as a subject in the modern sense in painting; an approach which is phenomenological in nature. Flowing from this point of view, Adorno insists that "... art is the broken limb of rational experience that is broken, fragmented, in Itself, each art is inheriting the restricted experience of an amputated organ—eye or ear or linguistic sensorium to preserve it in a space apart, as in a bottle or box or glass jar or metal cage,". What the artist often experiences is difficult to justify as real by the rational judgement of people outside these experiences. The writer utilises this context context to create the consequence of the dialectic in modernity in the text and painted objects.

This approach is different from the previous periods like the 18 and 19th centuries of European Art historic encounter with the shadow of an object of light and shade in painting. The idea is a reconstruction of a shadow as it confronts the perception and imagination of the artist—writer in painting. In order to break away from the tradition's understanding of forms, the artist, writer realised that the thinking of Adorno in Bernstein (2006: 198) becomes an essential ingredient of artistic logic. Here, the shadow becomes the object and the subject of dialogue to create a new language of painting like Duchamp infers that the material itself becomes the painting moving away from the previous age of technical reproduction as painting. It is more about engaging the thing in itself according to the theories of phenomenology by Edmund Husserl in J.A. Smith. P. Flowers and M. Larkin (2012) this encounter with a shadow as a subject of inquiry becomes the central focus on the entire painting narrative. An experience with a perception of a shadow is the key in the development of this writing. However, not the physical appearance of a shadow was not his focus, the idea and thinking that the idea of a shadow brings to bear on his understanding of aesthetic that his painting and writing bothers with. But, the rich experience which engages the artist-writer as the writer deals with this ephemeral object in the form of the shadow, the body

of this ephemeral objects contextualised the saying of Dithery (2009: 14):

Whatever presents itself as a unit in the flow of time because it has a unitary meaning, is the smallest unit which can be called an experience. Any more comprehensive unit which is made up of parts of a life, linked by a common meaning, is also called an experience, even when the parts are separated by interrupting events.

This encounter created a rich, enduring experience within the being of the artist—writer, which continue to enrich and change as the artist-writer constructs in painting through the experience with this ephemeral object which is the shadow, this phenomenological experience represents the thought in this paper. The conceptualisations of these paintings in writing capture and narrate a personal artistic encounter with shadows as a source of inquiry in the painting as a mean of an academic discourse that the art practice holds in the contemporary times. The argument is this, cannot paint creates a process of thinking or research if that should be used as the contextual word? Shadow in this context is a process of revealing the hidden knowledge, like the earth in Heideggerian aesthetic philosophy. Which means the things one can see and deal with physically while the world, on the other hand, reveals things one feels but cannot see. This, perhaps, would create a better understanding of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception within the context of creation and the artist-writer. In all of these, we see how the artists have reconstructed their gained experiences to justify what they try showing to the audience, from Gogh to Odutokun and finally the artist-writer, it is about translating these experiences into space and the textual experiences of these translations of the visual imageries which constitute the modernity of modernism and the modernism in Itself.

## 7 Conclusion

Inclusion, this study has shown that the three artists under study demonstrate through their works that artworks indeed form a branch of a new philosophical theory, and the process of articulation by the artists is also the same with the process of philosophical text by writers within the body of phenomenological theory. This idea will continue to assume a strong point as more evidence continues to stream out of the thought process in the practice of painting and understanding of phenomenology as the author has clearly exemplified in this study. The three artists' works and their explanations have shown some form of clarity in the practice of painting or the theoretical reading of a phenomenological text. Perhaps, this study would be a form of reinforcement in the documentation of the practice of art, especially painting. The study will also help to scrutinise scholar's assessment of the artist's methodology in the research techniques and further explain or add voice to the thinking of George Smith in the theory he calls "the artist—philosopher".

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